

Rabies Information

Introduction

Have you ever woken up from a deep sleep to find a bat flying over your head? Or have you accidentally let your dog(s) or cat(s) rabies vaccinations lapse? If so, you may be at risk for contracting rabies, and the following information will be very helpful for you to know.

Cause & Spread

Rabies is a disease of animals and people. Rabies is caused by a virus that attacks the brain and nerves. The virus is carried in the saliva (spit, drool) of a rabid animal. Rabies can also be spread by a scratch or if infected saliva gets into an open cut or wound or onto a mucous membrane, such as the eye, nose or throat. Once the virus is inside people, it spreads through the body and kills the victims, if they are not treated quickly. The good news is that rabies in humans, pets, and livestock can be prevented by a vaccine. For people who are bitten or scratched by a rabid animal, prompt treatment will protect the person from getting rabies. Treatment usually involves 5 shots of safe and effective vaccine in the arm and one shot of another medicine called Human Rabies Immune Globulin (HRIG).

Any animal with fur can get rabies, but some animals are much more likely to get the disease than others. Bats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, and woodchucks are the wild animals most likely to have the disease in Massachusetts. Domestic animals like dogs, cats, ferrets, and farm animals can get rabies from wild animals. This is why it is so important to vaccinate pets and livestock. These are the animals that people are around the most. Pets and stray dogs and cats can act like a bridge between wild animals and people, bringing rabies from wild animals into your home. **You should never take animals from the wild and bring them home to keep as pets!**

Guidelines

Here are some simple guidelines you and your family can follow to help prevent Rabies exposures:

- Vaccinate your pets! Cats, dogs, and ferrets all need to be vaccinated by a veterinarian regularly. If you own livestock, you should make sure their vaccinations are up to date.
- Do not feed or handle wild animals. Teach children that although a baby skunk, bunny or raccoon may look cute and friendly, it can be very dangerous.
- Do not feed or touch stray animals, and avoid all sick or strange-acting animals.
- Cover your garbage cans, and don't leave pets' food outside where it can attract wild animals.
- Do not keep wild animals as pets. Not only is this dangerous for you and the animal, it's also against the law. REMEMBER – THERE IS NO CURE FOR RABIES! (It's not worth the risk.)
- Do not touch or pick up dead animals.
- Leave bats alone.
- Discourage the permission of allowing animals into the classroom (you have no idea if this animal is up to date on their vaccines!).
- Never handle a bat, especially with bare hands. Use thick gloves, tongs, or a shovel to remove a dead bat, or call in bat-removal experts. (If you wake up with one flying above your head, you should assume that rabies exposure was possible. A bat's bite is so small, you may not even feel it! Seek prompt medical attention.)
- Do not let your pet play with bats.
- Keep bats out of the house or other buildings by closing or covering the attic or other dark sheltered areas. Put screens on the windows.

Tested Animals

In 2003, 2,983 specimens were submitted to the Massachusetts State Laboratory Institute (SLI)

for rabies testing. Of these specimens, 216 tested positive for rabies. Skunks and raccoons accounted for 77% of all positive animals. Cats constituted the highest number of submissions of any animal. Also, in 2003 there were fewer submissions and subsequently fewer positive results compared with the past ten years. The State Lab received the fewest submissions for testing since 1992 and had the fewest positive results since 1996.

Contact

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Needham Health Department continue to focus on educating the public to reduce the risk of rabies. For more information on Rabies, you can contact the Needham Health Department at (781) 455-7523 or check out the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's website at - www.state.ma.us/dph/cdc/epii/rabies/rabies.htm.